



Freight Is Piled Along Barge Canal Waiting for Boats; Waterway Is Becoming a Rival of Railways as a Carrier

Business Has Caused A Big Jump in Rates

By Lloyd S. Graham

FIGURING in years or even months, it was not so very long ago when the wise ones who knew about the barge canal construction would grin knowingly and say little or nothing about its future possibilities as a freight carrier from the West. It seemed to be the common opinion that the canal construction was an excuse largely for the distribution of political favors. Surely, it could never compete with the railroads.

Whatever basis the wisecracks had for such unseemly, cloudy opinions, true or untrue, the abnormal industrial and transportation conditions have brought about a condition so that the canal as a potential factor in transportation is in the limelight—general conditions which are almost paradoxical.

Compete With Roads

That is to say, since the days of "Clinton's folly" it has seldom been in the limelight except when held up for the somewhat doubtful approval of the voters when new appropriations were needed. It is paradoxical in that it now can compete with the railroads. Also, that its carriers are now making freight-carrying trips from the Buffalo terminal to New York Harbor and Long Island Sound points considerably quicker than the railroad, with its hereditary and labor and equipment handicaps, is able to do or is likely to be able to do in the immediate future.

All of this happened within the two or three months. Much of the smack of the stories that are going the rounds about oil boom towns in Texas. Almost innumerable rumors are floating about in Buffalo financial and lake marine circles to the effect that this group or men or that is organizing canal and lake transportation companies involving millions of dollars. Much of it is nothing more than rumor, but not all.

One canal shipping representative told the writer about the agent of a Western industry surreptitiously laying two \$100 bills on his desk while pleading for space on some old tubs that could get part of his embargoed product to tidewater. But the space simply was not to be had at any price or bribe. The agent of a well known Detroit automobile industry offered the shipping representative a car personally if he could get space for a few hundred cars, designated for export, to New York Harbor.

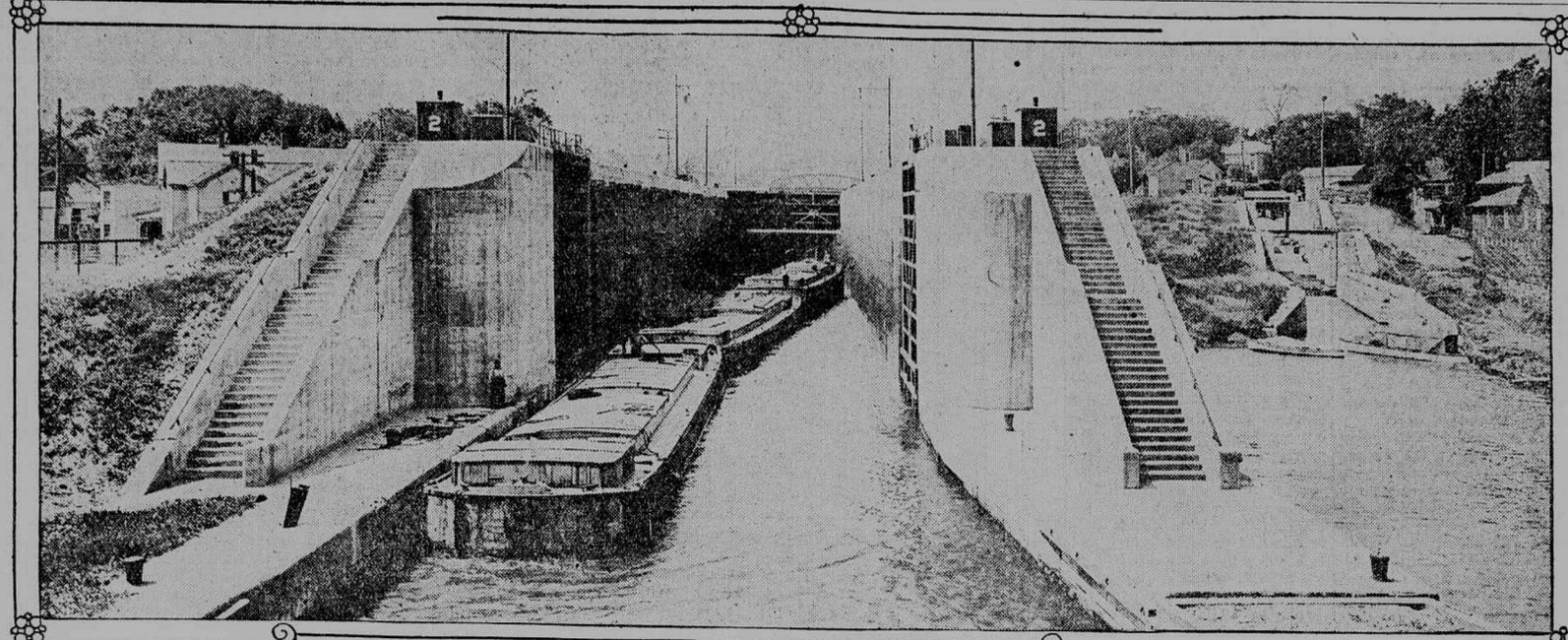
An agent of a combination of Detroit automobile firms with cars boxed for export tried to get canal boat space for 300,000 automobiles. At another time 30,000 barrels of cement were offered for canal space East.

Chartered Far Ahead

Even before the opening of navigation space was chartered for months ahead. At the present time practically all boats are chartered until October, with the possible exception of a few that are being held at exorbitantly high rates.

Some might say that this was another case of the profiteer. One shipping representative blandly gave the very common excuse for these times that it was a case of supply and demand. When the railroads put an embargo on automobile bodies, for instance, canal freight rates in some cases jumped from 10 per cent less than rail freight rates to considerably more than the rail rates over night. This applied also to some other merchandise under embargo.

With the great influx of industrial products from the Middle West, the railroads were absolutely unable to cope with the situation. They had trouble moving perishables and necessities, such as grain. Than

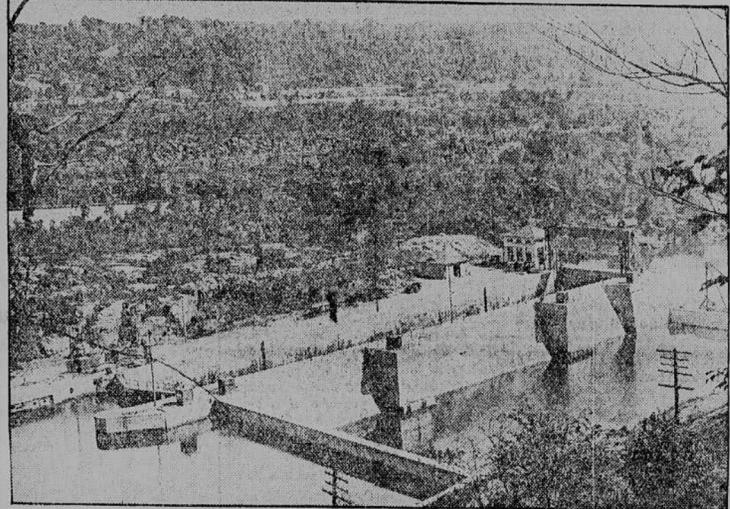


TOW of canal boats leaving the new barge canal at Waterford. At the right are three old locks displaced by one

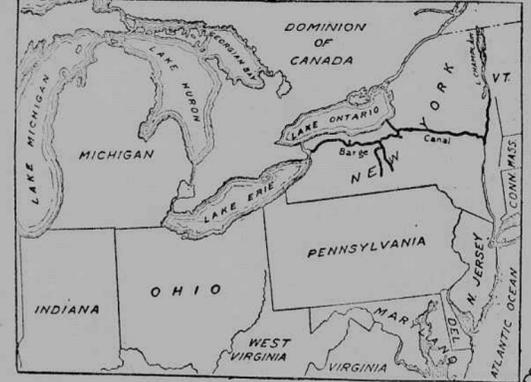
came the unauthorized strike and completed the tie-up. The railroads are just recovering, but representatives of Buffalo and Western industries, as well as those interested in canal transportation, are vigorously unanimous in the assertion that the railroads will not be able to compete seriously with the canal traffic for two or three years at least. Perhaps they have lost their advantage forever.

Building New Barges

So at the present time those shippers who were wise enough to charter space ahead for their prod-



VIEW showing the giant Little Falls lock on the New York Barge Canal, with a lift of 401-2 feet. This is next to the highest single lift lock in the world. This is on the Erie branch of the New York State canal system, which at this point climbs over a range of hills. Boats are floated over the hills by raising them from one lock to another slightly higher



ROUTE of the New York Barge Canal from Buffalo to the Hudson River

ucts are smiling with satisfaction, while the unfortunate ones are buying or building their own fleets of barges, or storing their product and whistling for conditions to change for the better, or moving a very small percentage by motor truck, or, as in the case of Detroit or other Western points, industrial agents, returning home literally with tears in their eyes and rage in their hearts, vow to build their own boats that will be able to navigate the Great Lakes as well as the Barge Canal and be independent of the present canal boat holders.

But, as was discovered during the war, boats cannot be built in a day. The fact remains, cargo space East cannot be bought. The back yard of a Buffalo factory producing a high grade automobile looks like a circus ground. But it isn't. Several "big tops" are sheltering a great number of cars in enforced storage.

The Canal's Tonnage

The actual number of canal boats of anything like valuable size or desirability is said to be under 200, and many of those are relics of the old Erie Canal days. One desperate Buffalo industry, it is said, bought a tug that had sunk and been under water all winter and a fleet of boats, some of which had not been

thought fit for use for the last two years. They are using them.

The total tonnage on the canal, including the hulks that have been resurrected and put in commission since the opening of navigation on May 15, the lighters and marine rigger that have been brought from New York Harbor and other points, and the new government boats recently put in commission, is probably considerably under 100,000.

Most of the new boats have been added by the Federal government, that is, "New York Canal Section, of the Inland Waterways Division; Transportation Division, United States War Department," to give the operating organization its full title.

The canal itself, including all maintenance and also towing service for boats not under their own power, is under the direction of the state. Edward S. Walsh, State Superintendent of Public Works, who has been a canal booster, recently demonstrated its usefulness by putting a steamer and four consorts through the canal from Buffalo to New York in 104 hours, loaded.

The average carrying time, however, is ten days to two weeks be-

tween Buffalo and New York, as well as points adjacent to the latter. Mr. Walsh states that traffic this season, despite the handicap of shortage of all kinds of boats, is 65 per cent greater than last season, and will rival if not exceed the banner year of 1903 in the old Erie Canal days.

Besides the governments, state and Federal, there are two boat owning companies worthy of the name, including the Lake Champlain Transportation Company, operating a fleet of ten barges, and the Inland Marine Corporation, a more preten-

sion Company is an old organization, as might be expected. When it entered the Barge Canal service last spring there were fond ideas, its Buffalo agent said, of diverting some of its Lake Champlain barges to this canal, but business picked up so there that they were able to divert only five. The other five they operate are under charter.

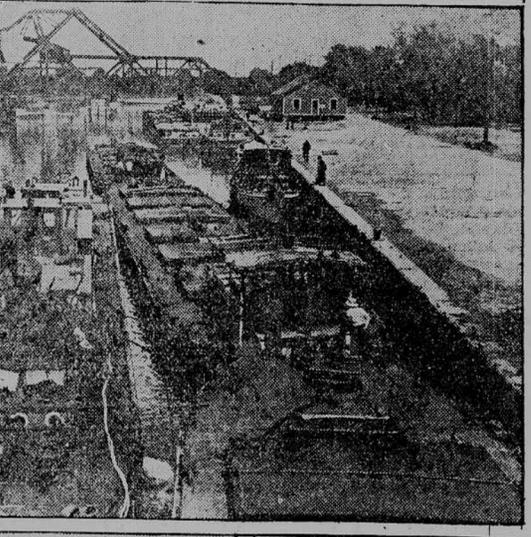
"Rush" by Boat

The Inland Marine Corporation, including the original company of its present backers, is only about five years old. Its Buffalo representative said that extensive expansion was planned, embracing a ma-

ture practically unlimited." No one expects the railroads to recover and attain the proportions of a serious competitor for years.

One Buffalo manufacturer of automobile bodies for a Syracuse company shipped 100 bodies on a rush order to the Syracuse industry. Imagine! A "rush" order by canal! Six months ago a man would have been counted crazy even to suggest such a thing. It took three days for the trip, which the company stated to the writer was ten days quicker than the average time of shipping the bodies by rail a distance of less than 200 miles!

Because better time can be made and because the barges will pay for



THE barge canal terminal at Tonawanda, showing a United States oil-burning cargo boat maneuvering three concrete fabricated boats

themselves in ten years, it is estimated, that automobile body builder is planning his own fleet of barges for next season.

A well known wallboard company in desperation bought its own fleet of barges. It finds it can put the equivalent of twenty freight cars in a barge, so its fleet practically has the capacity of a freight train, and that in the old style barges. A Niagara Falls breakfast food company has chartered considerable space for the season.

Shipping representatives were asked if they were taking any business from points west of Buffalo. With the exception of grain they were not.

"Why should we," they demanded, "when we can get any amount more business right here than we can handle?"

Lakes to Tidewater

That situation has given rise to the prevalence of the rumor that Detroit and Cleveland organizations are planning to build and operate barges on lakes as well as canal, with the idea of no transfer from

"Rush Orders" Being Sent to New York By Water

the lake point of loading until the barge reaches New York, Providence and other seaboard points. Regarding the feasibility of such a course there is a great divergence of opinion, some claiming that a boat built to stand the buffeting of the lakes would be too unwieldy for the canal except in the most tranquil summer days. It is quite certain, however, that the experiment will be tried.

Most of the east-bound business at present is grain, flour, lumber, pig iron and a variety of steel products. While the east-bound business seems to be of the greatest importance, getting food and raw materials to a waiting world, all of the boats are carrying west-bound goods to capacity.

One Federal official said there had been few, if any, cases where their barges had returned from New York empty this season. Flaxseed for a Buffalo oil products industry, sugar and general merchandise are carried.

From Monday to Thursday, inclusive, the second week of July this season, more than 1,600 tons of refined sugar from the seaboard refineries were unloaded at the Buffalo terminals, besides 1,200 barrels of asphalt from a single barge and two barge loads of general merchandise.

Those figures were given by J. B. Garman, state harbor master, who added that he never put in such a hectic, busy time before in all his twenty-six years on the job; which is saying a good deal, considering the halcyon days of the old Erie Canal, when more than 1,000 boats were on its muddy waters.

All Along the Line

The same prosperous condition is evident all along the canal. It is said a Schenectady electrical concern ships its export goods by its own barges and passes said goods direct into the holds of South American-bound ships in New York Harbor.

But most shippers at points between New York and Buffalo are unlucky if they do not own their own boats. Boat owners don't like to bother with short hauls. If they can load pig iron at Buffalo, taking three days for the process, go to Providence, R. I., taking three more days to unload, no shorter trip will tempt them unless it is a matter of handling grain from Buffalo to New York, and only then because boat time can be saved in that it takes but three hours to load or unload grain. Time is money on the canal.

Every one who owns a stick of floatable timber is hustling. The old easy-going canal days are gone, never to return. Any boatman or other employee who gums up the works by fracturing the Eighteenth Amendment gets fired quick, even in these days of labor scarcity. There is no more towpath. It is true the boatsmen and, in many cases, their families live on the boat, but, barring accidents or a shortage of coal, it's a case of "cast off" at daybreak and no "tying up" until dark. There is no more of the loitering along the towpath with mules and horses. That life has taken on the romantic tinge which only time can give.

Cost of a New Boat

It is stated authoritatively that a cement boat, built under war conditions, cost about \$25,000, the new type wooden boat about \$20,000, and steel boats—war prices, remember—about \$40,000.

Those prices probably can be bettered under present conditions. There is a great divergence of opinion on the cement-fabricated boat. Government officials, however, state that those placed in commission this season are standing up well. Most canal men favor the wood and steel, wood boats for great capacity and steel for strength.

Comparatively little canal boat building is being done at the present time, but the air is full of rumors of building operations by various individuals and companies to begin within the next month or two, boats for delivery next season. To a few it is a good speculative proposition with big cargo rates in sight, but to the bulk of the men interested in canal transportation and freight forwarding it is one of the safe, sure ways, practically the only sure way of relieving the rail freight congestion and easing the general transportation situation.